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ABSTRACT

A study examined (1) whether organizations "order" the four organizational roles (communication manager, communication liason, media relations specialist, communication technician) that public relations practitioners play, and (2) whether, if roles are hierarchically ordered, practitioners internalize the hierarchy by aspiring to "ideal" roles. A review of research indicated that organizations do, indeed, order practitioner roles by paying those in certain roles higher salaries than those in other roles. These salary differences were used to posit a role hierarchy. To determine if practitioners internalize the hierarchy by aspiring to higher roles, data were collected from approximately 300 practitioners. Each subject completed a measure that elicited information concerning how frequently they actually engaged in each of 24 activities. Dominant actual role was then determined by computing how often the subject played each role. A similar method was used to determine subjects' ideal roles. Results indicated that practitioners do not perceive their roles as horizontal, or equally valued ideals pursued on the basis of self-selection. Rather, they perceive the roles of communication manager, communication liason, media relations specialist, and communication technician as hierarchically ordered. In addition, it was found that practitioners seek to perform activities associated with roles higher on the hierarchy. (FL)

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Public Relations Division

A TEST OF ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE HIERARCHY
AMONG PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

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Paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education
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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to answer two research questions. First, do organizations "order" the four organizational roles (communication manager, communication liaison, media relations, communication technician) that public relations practitioners play? Second, if roles are hierarchically ordered by organizations, do practitioners internalize this hierarchy by aspiring to "ideal" roles higher in the role hierarchy? This study provides evidence that organizations "order" practitioner roles by paying practitioners in certain roles higher salaries than they pay practitioners in other roles. Salary differences were used to posit a role hierarchy. Internalization of this role hierarchy was tested by hypothesizing that practitioners aspire to potential "ideal" roles higher in the hierarchy than their current "actual" roles. A national survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America confirmed the hypothesis.

Paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication National Convention, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, August 6, 1984.

The field of public relations is in major transition. The profession is struggling with the issues of professional status and stature, evaluation and measurement of program impact, accountability, organizational context expertise, and participation in organizational strategic planning.

While some within public relations advocate change, the major impetus for change comes from demanding organizational environments and organizational managements. McElreath posits that high levels of uncertainty in the organization's environment, coupled with recognition of organizational problems, increases management's evaluation of public relations activities. As organizations adopt the "management by objectives" philosophy, public relations units and other organizational components are required to specify what they seek to accomplish through the use of organizational resources. Accountability is pushed down through the organizational structure, affecting staff activities previously untouched by such responsibility.¹

The Identity Crisis

Gaining management acceptance of public relations as an essential tool of an organization is the primary professional challenge facing corporate practitioners, according to a 1979 survey of public relations executives of the Fortune 500 companies.² Over 80 percent of 157 respondents indicated that a major concern is winning management respect for the profession. Almost 88 percent of all respondents said that public relations is receiving more recognition, but falls far short of parity with respect levels commanded by financial management, legal, long-range planning, and research and development.³

Many respondents said management still considers the public relations function "to be a necessary evil" required by an increasingly illuminated corporate fishbowl. An equal number felt the respect for the function has stagnated over the prior five years.⁴

Close argues that there are four requirements for the development of public relations as a management function:

1. management support and understanding is essential;
2. public relations professionals must broaden their interests and perspectives in order to identify with the concerns of management;
3. public relations professionals must use this broader perspective to identify the key problems, needs and issues affecting the organization, and then help management develop and execute a constructive response to these issues;
4. become good managers as well as skilled professionals.⁵

Ehling argues that public relations practitioners, while seeking to elevate their craft to professional levels and their status to a management function, find it difficult to conceptualize (a) the area of public relations jurisdiction (distinguishing the operational content of public relations from other operational content); (b) the nature of a "public relations problem" such that all concerned are clear about the dimensions of the problem and why it is a public relations rather than a legal, personnel, or economic problem; (c) the specific courses of action (or activities) to be designed and utilized to attain a desired end (and solve the problem); and (d) role of communication, as either the essential element of public relations management or merely one among many means or techniques to be employed in the name of public relations.⁶

Because public relations practitioners defer decision making to their superiors, Ehling argues, a "public relations problem" becomes anything

top management says it is. If a "problem" cannot be forced into one of the organization's existing functional slots, it becomes, a problem by default, a "public relations" problem.⁷

Ehling argues that public relations practitioners have always faced such intellectual and theoretical uncertainty. Such uncertainty has afflicted the public relations field from the outset, as reflected in the many labels for public relations. No other organizational function—e.g., production, finance, marketing, or personnel management—has as many pseudonyms as public relations. The function has been called public affairs, corporate communication, information services, public information, publicity, special services, communications relations, corporate affairs, special projects press relations, and, even, institutional advancement.⁸

Practitioner Roles

An organization is distinguished from a simple aggregate of persons by its success in inducing role behavior among its members. Role playing, according to Katz and Kahn, is "recurring actions of an individual, appropriately inter-related with the repetitive activities of others, so as to yield predictable outcomes." Organizations are social systems, a stable "collective pattern in which people play their parts."⁹

Role behavior consists of a series of discrete acts. When essential, persisting features of these acts are abstracted, a role is inductively generalized.¹⁰ A public relations practitioner, occupying an office or point (position) in the organizational space of a large corporation, may engage in a number of specific, distinct acts in the preparation of a communication message and the selection of an appropriate medium of dissemination.¹¹ When these persistent, recurring acts are abstracted as "message and media selection," a

role or at least a portion of a role has been abstracted from the specific acts.¹²

In the context of public relations, the practitioner occupies a single office within the organizational structure, but that office embraces a variety of organizational roles. Through the process of role sending, other members of the organization encourage or discourage certain types of role playing.¹³ A number of situational and contextual variables may impact which role is encouraged or discouraged, and the signals about the role that are received by the practitioner are neither consistent nor unambiguous.

Many research questions arise regarding the significance of role behavior in the context of public relations. Several studies have been completed in this research setting.¹⁴ Broom and Smith report that different practitioner role behaviors affect client perceptions of the practitioners themselves and of practitioner contributions to task accomplishment. The test consisted of five experimentally-administered role model treatments in 20 client groups.¹⁵

The five role model treatments represented various ways practitioners behave while carrying out public relations responsibilities. Each role model in the experiment was manipulated as a single distinct behavioral pattern or role. In a natural setting, a practitioner adopts varying degrees of all roles. Broom and Smith argued, however, that a practitioner develops a dominant pattern of job-related behavior through individual preference and training, and in response to others' expectations and situational constraints.¹⁶

In 1979, Broom drew a systematic sample of current members of the Public Relations Society of America.¹⁷ Surveyed by mail, 355 practitioners who worked full-time for a single organization (not as employees of an agency)

responded.¹⁸ Dozier later subjected Broom's 24 measures of organizational roles to factor analysis where four empirically-grounded organizational roles emerged.¹⁹ The four roles were:

Communication Managers. Practitioners playing this role are perceived by others as the organization's public relations expert. They make communication policy decisions and are held accountable by others and themselves for the success or failure of communication programs. They follow a systematic planning process.

Communication Liaisons. Practitioners playing this role represent the organization at public meetings and create opportunities for management to hear the views of priority publics. Predominantly communication facilitators, these practitioners also identify alternative solutions to organizational problems. Similar to communication managers in many respects, communication liaisons do not make policy decisions and are not held accountable for program success or failure.

Media Relations Specialists. Practitioners playing this role actively seek to place messages about the organization in the mass media. At the same time, they also keep others in the organization informed of what is being said about the organization (and about issues important to the organization) in the media. They do not make policy, nor are they accountable for program outcomes.

Communication Technicians. Practitioners playing this role are responsible for producing communication products, implementing decisions made by others. They take photographs; assemble graphics; write brochures, pamphlets and news releases; and handle all aspects of production. They do not participate in policy decision-making, nor are they responsible for outcomes.

In the public relations profession, there is controversy over whether or not a definite, vertical hierarchy of organizational roles exists. There is evidence to support both sides of the argument.

First, Dozier found that organizational management rewards certain practitioner roles more highly than others, in terms of annual salary. In a 1981 survey of practitioners in a single community, he found distinct salary differences among the four public relations organizational roles. These differences remain, even when professional experience is controlled. For example, communication technicians were paid about one-third less than practitioners whose

dominant role was classified as communication manager. Further, Dozier found that the communication technician role did not appear to be a transitional role, leading to better career opportunities and higher pay. Communication technicians are paid about \$10,000 less each year than communication managers and communication liaison practitioners, despite comparable education and professional experience. A similar problem afflicts the media relations practitioner: income is only slightly better than that of communication technicians.²⁰ (See Table 1).

The Dozier study, along with others, provides empirical evidence to support the proposition that a definite hierarchy of public relations roles exists, based on salary differences. Druck and Hiebert argue that a natural hierarchy of organizational levels exists, called the "career ladder."²¹

Dozier and Gottesman, on the other hand, question the existence of a vertical role hierarchy, in which practitioners aspire to roles higher in the hierarchy. They found that many practitioners were generally satisfied with their jobs despite their low ranking in the public relations role hierarchy. For example, they discovered that many communication technicians found creativity, spontaneity, and emotional involvement in the low-level role they played.²²

Their study provided evidence that many practitioners are self-selecting the communication technician role as a relatively permanent career choice due to these subjective, intrinsic factors (i.e., creativity, spontaneity, emotional involvement).²³

These public relations professionals, called "creative artists" practitioners by Dozier and Gottesman, want more say in organizational decisions, but are distrustful of changes implied by climbing the organizational ladder to decision-making levels.²⁴

Table 1

Salary Differences Among Public Relations Practitioner Roles With and Without
Controls for Covariate of Years of Professional Experience

1981 Census of Public Relations Practitioners in San Diego*

Grand Mean Salary = \$27,020

ANNUAL SALARIES			
ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE	(N)	Unadjusted for** Professional Experience	Adjusted for*** Professional Experience
Communication Manager	24	\$33,000	\$32,630
Communication Liaison	28	\$31,720	\$31,710
Media Relations Specialist	25	\$23,360	\$23,530
Communication Technician	35	\$21,770	\$21,920

*Census of San Diego members of the International Association of Business Communicators, the Public Relations Society of America, the San Diego Public Relations Club, and practitioners affiliated with Women in Communications.

**Differences in salaries are statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level. $F(3,108) = 5.60$; significance = 0.001.

***Differences in salaries are statistically significant after controlling for the influence of professional experience (number of years of professional experience). $F(3,107) = 6.42$; significance = 0.001.

Hypotheses

Controversy surrounds the existence of a public relations organizational role hierarchy. As indicated earlier, certain practitioner roles are differentially rewarded by organizational management. Thus, management sends role messages to the practitioner about hierarchical ordering, about those roles deemed appropriate to the practitioner's office in terms of their relative desirability to the organization.

On the other hand, many public relations practitioners find that intrinsic rewards (e.g., creativity and spontaneity) often make lower paying roles more desirable than higher paying ones. Empirical evidence has indicated that these practitioners may be self-selecting the lower-positioned roles as a relatively permanent career choice.²⁵ Overall, it is debatable whether or not practitioners perceive public relations roles as hierarchical, that is, that some roles are more desirable to the organization than others.

In this study, the Druck and Hiebert model of a hierarchical "career ladder" is hypothesized as true, thus rejecting Dozier and Gottesman's "permanent self-selection" argument for purposes of this test. If practitioners perceive their organizational roles as hierarchical, then practitioners are posited to aspire to roles higher in the hierarchy than the role they now actually play. To test this proposition, a comparison is made between the practitioner's dominant actual role and his or her dominant ideal role.

The construct of dominant organizational role requires some specification. Public relations practitioners adopt varying degrees of four public relations roles (communication manager, communication liaison, media relations, and communication technician), although one role is considered dominant. That role which is performed more frequently than all the other roles is considered

dominant. A practitioner can be classified as a "communication manager," for example, because he or she performs the discrete activities of that role with greater frequency than the activities of the other three roles. A typology of practitioners is derived in this way.

Two types of public relations practitioners were tested: media relations and communication liaison practitioners. As shown in Table 2, only these two practitioner types could be used to test hypotheses, because only they had potential "ideal" roles higher and lower in the hierarchy to which they could aspire. Communication managers, on the other hand, could in principle only aspire to roles lower in the hierarchy, while communication technicians could in principle only aspire to roles higher in the hierarchy.

Two roles in the public relations role hierarchy are positioned higher (communication manager, communication liaison) and one role is lower (communication technician) than the media relations role (see Table 2). Based on the proposition that public relations practitioners will aspire to dominant ideal roles higher in the hierarchy than their current dominant actual role, the following hypothesis was formulated:

- h_1 : For the practitioner whose dominant actual role is media relations, the combined mean of the ideal communication manager and ideal communication liaison role scores will be significantly higher than the ideal communication technician role score.

The communication liaison role is located one role below the communication manager role in the theoretical role hierarchy (see Table 2). Two roles are located below the communication liaison in the hierarchy: media relations and communication technician roles (see Table 2). Based on the proposition that public relations practitioners will aspire to dominant ideal roles higher in the hierarchy than their current dominant actual role, the following hypothesis was formulated:

Table 2

HYPOTHETICAL HIERARCHY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
PRACTITIONER DOMINANT ROLES*

HIGH	Communication Manager
	Communication Liaison
	Media Relations Specialist
LOW	Communication Technician

*Based on differences in annual income among practitioners in each dominant role. (See Table 1)

- h₂: For the practitioner whose dominant actual role is communication liaison, the ideal communication manager role score will be significantly higher than the combined mean of the ideal media relations and ideal communication technician role scores.

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, measures were required of both practitioner actual roles and practitioner ideal roles. Using Broom's set of 24 role measures, respondents were asked how frequently they actually engaged in each of the 24 activities making up the role measure set. Respondents used a seven-point scale, ranging from "never" to "always." The respondent's dominant actual role was determined by computing how often the respondent played each role, then specifying the respondent's dominant role as the role the respondent played most frequently.

A similar method was used to determine each respondent's ideal roles. For each of the 24 role activities, respondents were asked how often they would ideally engage in each activity. By computing the frequency of "ideal" practices, "ideal" scores were computed for each respondent for each of the four organizational roles.

A systematic survey of 600 members of the Public Relations Society of America was conducted in April 1982, using the national membership list as a sample frame. Second and third mailings were made to sample members not returning the original self-administered questionnaire. A 90 percent response was achieved.

Results

From the 1982 national survey of Public Relations Society of America members, 124 practitioners (or 40.9 percent of the sample) were classified as

media relations specialists. They engaged in those organizational role activities more frequently than any other role activities. Missing data required that 10 of these practitioners be removed from the analysis. Among the remaining media relations practitioners, the "ideal" communication technician role score was computed. The average score among media relations specialists for the "ideal" communication technician role measure (how often they would "ideally" do communication technician role activities) was 4.14 on the seven-point scale. The combined mean of the communication liaison and communication manager "ideal" role measures was 5.44. A paired t-test of differences in means was conducted. The t-value was 11.69 (d.f. = 113), significant at the .01 level.

Another 17 practitioners were identified as predominantly playing the communication liaison role. Of these, five were excluded from analysis due to missing data. Among the remaining communication liaisons, the average "ideal" communication manager role score was 5.87. The combined mean of the communication technician and media relations role scores among communication liaisons was 3.77. A paired t-test of differences in means was conducted. The t-value was 7.62 (d.f. = 11), significant at the .01 level. The results for both practitioner types are displayed in Table 3.

Conclusion

Public relations practitioners do not perceive their organizational roles as "horizontal," as equally valued "ideals" pursued on the basis of self-selection. Rather, practitioners perceive the roles of communication manager, communication liaison, media relations specialist, and communication technician as hierarchically ordered. That is, the activities that make up some roles are perceived as "ideals" that practitioners would do if they could. These "ideal"

Table 3

TEST OF DIFFERENCES IN MEANS OF IDEAL ROLES
OF MEDIA RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>Standard Error</u>
Ideal Communication Technician Role Mean	4.14	1.28	0.12
Combined Mean of Ideal Communication Manager and Ideal Communication Liaison Roles	5.44	0.79	0.07

T Value = 11.69 d.f. = 113 $p < .01$

TEST OF DIFFERENCES IN MEANS OF IDEAL ROLES
OF COMMUNICATION LIAISON PRACTITIONERS

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>Standard Error</u>
Ideal Communication Manager Role Mean	5.87	0.53	0.17
Combined Mean of Ideal Communication Technician and Ideal Media Relations Roles	3.77	1.20	0.35

T Value = 7.88 d.f. = 11 $p < .01$

activities are accurately predicted from a hierarchy of organizational roles, and the practitioner's actual position in that hierarchy. Practitioners seek to do activities associated with roles higher in the hierarchy of roles. The hierarchy is based on a "role-sending" message from the organization that rewards some roles that practitioners play more than other roles.

Evidence from this study supports the existence of a hierarchy of organizational roles among public relations practitioners, as posited in Druck and Miebert's model of the practitioner "career ladder." Practitioners do perceive a hierarchy of roles. Practitioners indicate that they would "ideally" engage in those activities associated with higher-order organizational roles.

However, the evidence does not support the notion that practitioners actually climb the "career ladder," that higher-order, better-paying roles come to those practitioners with greater professional experience. Rather, some practitioners continue to play lower-level organizational roles, despite many years of professional experience. The mechanisms of role assignment and the mechanisms of role transition are useful foci of further inquiry.

NOTES

¹Mark P. McElreath, "Public Relations Evaluative Research: Summary Statement," Public Relations Review 3 (Winter 1977):129.

²James B. Strenski, "The Top 12 PR Challenges for 1980," Public Relations Journal 36 (February 1980):32.

³Strenski.

⁴Strenski.

⁵H. W. Close, "Public Relations as a Management Function," Public Relations Journal 36 (March 1980):14.

⁶William P. Ehling, "Toward a Theory of Public Relations Management: Applications of Purposive and Conflict Theories to Communication Management," paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, East Lansing, Michigan, August 8-11, 1981, pp. 5-6.

⁷Ehling, p. 6-7.

⁸Ehling, p. 7.

⁹Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1966; reprint ed., New York: Wiley and Sons, 1978), p. 179.

¹⁰Role behavior refers to the recurring actions of an individual, appropriately interrelated with the repetitive activities of others so as to yield a predictable outcome. (Katz and Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, p. 174); Role refers to one or more recurrent activities out of a total pattern of interdependent activities which in combination produce the organizational output. (Katz and Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, p. 179)

¹¹An office is a particular point in organizational space. (Katz and Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, p. 179)

¹²Katz and Kahn, p. 174.

¹³Role sending is a communication process which attempts to influence an individual whose role or office is under consideration. It is intended to bring about conformity to the expectations of the sender. (Katz and Kahn, The Social Psychology of Organizations, p. 175)

¹⁴A series of role studies were initiated at the University of Wisconsin and continued at San Diego State University. [Glen M. Broom and George D. Smith, "Testing the Practitioner's Impact on Clients," Public Relations Review 5 (Fall 1979):47-59. Glen M. Broom, "A Comparison of Sex Roles in Public Relations," Public Relations Review 8 (Fall 1982):17-22.]

¹⁵Broom and Smith, p. 48.

¹⁶Broom and Smith.

¹⁷Glen M. Broom, "A Comparison of Sex Roles in Public Relations," Public Relations Review 8 (Fall 1982): 17-22.

¹⁸The study was conducted by Glen M. Broom through a research grant from the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education. Practitioners working for public relations or advertising agencies were excluded from the factor analysis.

¹⁹David M. Dozier, "The Diffusion of Evaluation Methods Among Public Relations Practitioners," paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, East Lansing, Michigan, August 8, 1981.

²⁰Dozier, p. 27.

²¹Kalman B. Druck and Ray E. Hiebert, Your Personal Guidebook (New York: Public Relations Society of America, 1979), p. 18.

²²David M. Dozier and Michael Gottesman, "Subjective Dimensions of Organizational Roles Among Public Relations Practitioners," paper presented to the Public Relations Division, Association for Education in Journalism Annual Convention, Athens, Ohio, July 27, 1982, p. 18.

²³Dozier and Gottesman, p. 26.

²⁴Dozier and Gottesman.

²⁵Dozier and Gottesman.

²⁶Dozier, pp. 11-18.